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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MAURITIUS AIRPORT UPGRADE: MADE IN CHINA

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY. A planned overhaul of the passenger terminal of Mauritius' international airport is moving ahead, with French design assistance and Chinese funding. When work is completed, the airport should be able to handle four million passengers annually. The Chinese funding is part of a recent, significant increase in Chinese economic interest in Mauritius. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) A planned passenger terminal overhaul is moving forward at Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Airport (SSR), Mauritius' international airport, with Chinese funds and French designs. A new terminal building will be built as an extension of the existing terminal, most of which will then be demolished, and the remainder upgraded. The work is being overseen by the newly created company Airport Terminal Operations Ltd. (ATOL), a subsidiary of Airports of Mauritius Ltd. (AML). ATOL was set up to handle all aspects of the design, construction, and operations of the new facility. ATOL, 90 percent owned by AML with the other ten percent held by Aeroports de Paris (ADP), received a loan of 195 million Euros from the Export and Import Bank of China (EXIM China) to finance the project.

13. (U) First built in 1945 as Plaisance Airport, SSR came under the ownership and management of AML in 1999, coinciding with the last major project undertaken at the airport. In a conversation with Conoff, AML Director of Operations Romesh Bhoyroo mentioned that the current project to upgrade the passenger terminal has been "in the works for a long time." He stated that ADP currently has a team in Mauritius working on the design plans, and construction is planned to start by August 2009 and conclude by August 2011. Bhoyroo also mentioned that ADP would be involved in the operation of the new terminal building and would remain for two years after construction is completed to help get the terminal up and running.

14. (U) According to press reports, the renovated and extended terminal will have a handling capacity of around four million passengers annually (the number for 2008 is 2.6 million) and will include state of the art technology, new aircraft parking stands, and additional passenger parking. Bhoyroo said the new building would have five jet-ways, which, added to the three in the currently existing terminal building, would make a total of eight gates.

15. (SBU) According to Bhoyroo, EXIM China's entry into the project as financial backing came about after the Prime Minister's visit to China in 2007 (reftel), where he may have mentioned the airport as a possible way for China to provide help to Mauritius. He commented that "that's how these things work."

COMMENT

16. (SBU) Chinese investment in Mauritius' international airport, a crucial gateway for this heavily tourism-dependent country, must be seen against the backdrop not only of the deep roots of the

Sino-Mauritian population here, but also of a significant recent jump in Chinese economic interest. The Chinese firm Shanxi Tianli Enterprise Group has recently made the largest foreign direct investment in Mauritius to date, in the "Mauritius Tianli Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone." The Zone is expected to attract Chinese investors in a number of sectors, with total investment estimated at over half a billion USD (reftel). Chinese president Hu Jintao's upcoming visit in February will further strengthen these new economic ties, and help ensure continued growth of Chinese investment in Mauritius. Mauritius is taking unprecedented measures to prepare for the visit. Police Commissioner Rampersad told POLOFF "we are even closing our roads for him. We never close our roads."

WHITE